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ABSTRACT

College presidents have been described as visionaries responsible for shaping a school's objectives and matching talents with resources to realize those goals. College trustee boards must provide the continuity and stability necessary to guarantee the integrity of the college. Because boards have a 15-20% turnover annually, trustee education must be a high priority for boards. A board retreat with the president and all trustees present is good way to introduce a new trustee and a president and to impart values and vision. Among the board members, it is most often the chairperson who communicates the interests and concerns of the board to the president. The chair's relationship to both fellow board members and the president must be excellent if the college is to attain and maintain excellence. Hiring a college president is the most important task a board can face; a task which can be long and arduous. Establishing and maintaining a good president/board relationship will reduce the likelihood that a president will need to be replaced. Boards and presidents should sit down to develop a clear common vision, shared by both, and the priorities to be used to get there. Then boards should stand back, challenging and supporting, as the president expands and builds the dream. Evaluations should be based on what is reasonable, and should be undertaken routinely rather than just at crisis times. Boards should encourage professional growth through academies and state and national affiliations. Boards should not shortchange presidents on salaries and fringes. Finally, both parties should maintain a sense of humor through the good and the bad. (GFW)

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EFFECTIVE BOARD/PRESIDENT RELATIONS

Presented By:

Mrs. Beatrice Doser, Chairperson
Board of Trustees
Montcalm Community College

at Michigan Community College Association In-Service Meeting
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EFFECTIVE BOARD/PRESIDENT RELATIONS

Today, I thought I would start by considering what people mean when they say "president" or "board member."

First I'm going to describe the president. To the legislator the president is, that "turkey who's always down here in Lansing trying to feather her own nest." To the voter the president is that "dude who wants to raise my taxes so he can build a fancy new computer lab so I'll have even more trouble understanding what my kids are doing." To the student the president is that "dame who manages to foul up my registration schedule every semester." To the industrialist talking to his peers the president is that "gal who taught my employees the skills to make my factory so profitable." To the program director for the local club the president is the "cheap speaker who will come even when the weather is bad."

Playing the central role in the life of the college, always available, always smiling, always well-dressed, the president is described by Arkansas governor Bill Clinton as "a visionary with the understanding of what the school is all about and the ability to articulate that vision clearly and persistently through realistic goals and objectives...a tactician with the ability to match tasks with talent, whether human or technical, align scarce resources with school needs, and use every opportunity to move a school closer to its vision...a diplomat, with the self-discipline to evaluate fairly how objectives and resource management are working to support vision, coupled with an unyielding commitment to excellence while communicating with the diversity of school interest groups."

David Robinson, President of Edison Community College in Florida, stated, "The CEO is vulnerable...vulnerable to criticism, pressure, long hours, unrealistic expectations, alienation from family and friends, and the overriding concern that the CEO is ultimately responsible for everything that happens to the institution."

The Building Communities report indicates that the role of the president is becoming more complicated and more risky as more constituencies are served, resources become more scarce and bureaucratic encumbrances become more numerous. The president needs to be a coalition builder, a strong manager and an inspired leader with an educational vision who can inspire others to follow.

The presidency is one of the most rewarding, non-routine and interesting of all professional careers but, at the same time, is also demanding, highly visible, sometimes lonely and often frustrating.

Now what about boards? A lot of people think that board members are in it for the money. A friend thought I was getting a board salary of $25,000 a year. When I told her I was actually donating my time, she said,..."Well, you're not as smart as I thought you were."

Building Communities reports that 15 to 20% of trustees are new to their position each year. Since a trustee usually requires a couple of years to really understand the college and the role of the trustee, that means each board has about five "up-to-speed" trustees and two with "learner permits." Translated, that means trustee education must be a high priority for boards.

This meeting, the MCCA summer workshop, and the ACCT regional and national events are not just nice; they are essential to trustees who want to become better trustees.

Trustees come and go, but good boards provide the continuity and stability necessary to guarantee integrity at a college. Immediately after a new trustee is elected, a board retreat with the president and all trustees present is an excellent way to get off to a good start. The retreat agenda should include a review of college programs, procedures and operational style as well as impart the values and vision of the board and president. There should be a frank discussion of the value of the president to the institution and the board's responsibility to maintain and enhance that value. The board chair or another capable and respected trustee should help new members to understand the rationale behind the president's salary and benefits and the need for development activities, challenge and board support. The entire board must understand and appreciate the value of a good president.

A president receives direction from the entire board acting at a meeting or from the chair; therefore, the selection of a good board chair is crucial to good board/president relations. The chair serves, as one community college president said, "...to keep the small-minded, envious or contentious board member from tying up too much of the president's time in stroking egos or responding to petty requests." The chair tries to clarify the lines between policy and administration for the board. The chair acts as a conscience, reminding individual trustees when they are meddling or getting too cozy with some campus entity. The chair sees board problems such as personality clashes and political divisions as his/her responsibility, not the responsibility of the president. And a president would do well to step back from such risky areas.

A good president deserves not just a good chair but the best chair. The chair's relationship to both fellow board members and the president must be excellent if the college is to attain and maintain excellence. Many colleges rotate board chairs or limit them to two-year terms as a fair and politically sound practice, but such procedures do not guarantee the selection of the best chair.

I want to quote Terry O'Bannion of the League for Innovation who told trustees at the ACCT Vancouver convention last fall that "Changing board chairs every year can be as disturbing to the institution as changing presidents every year would be. Outstanding boards that want to hold on to an outstanding president should consider changing their policies to allow for the best board chair to be elected..."

Well, I've talked a little about the president and a little about the board. A given board/president relationship begins with the hiring of a president by a board. This task is considered to be the most important task a board can face.

At one time it may have been a simple, straightforward task, but that's not true today. The process can take up to two years from the time a board realizes they need to look for a new CEO until the new president is functioning full time on campus. During this period there may be a re-evaluation of college priorities. Then an elaborate and rather expensive procedure commences involving the entire college and part of the community. It absorbs the energies of many people for many months. During the process unlikely

friendships and lasting hostilities may be formed. The public is baffled by the slowness of the process and the aura of secrecy. And board watchers suspect violations of the open meetings act. It is usually not a college's best years.

Presidential candidates, according to Clark Kerr, would really prefer to be president at a four-year college over a two-year college, a private over a public, a religious over a non-religious and an academically elite over a non-elite. Using that comparison, the desirability of a community college presidency is ranked dead last. Once hired a candidate only averages five years as president of the same community college; moreover, the first couple of years of a presidency, like the first couple of years of a trusteeship, do not usually produce peak performance.

If the college is functioning efficiently and effectively, student learning is being enhanced, the climate is positive and the board and president work well together, the board should make every effort to keep that president and not run the gauntlet of trying to find a better replacement.

In 1987 Lynn Whitmore conducted a survey of 522 trustees from 90 colleges in 24 states. She asked trustees to rate factors that were the most important in contributing to good board/president relationships. Their rating showed "open communication between board and president" in first place. Second was "mutual respect and confidence," then "clear recommendations from the president and no surprises at board meetings," followed by early board involvement in policy-making." Next was "agreement between president and board as to college goals" and last was "understanding the difference between the policy role of trustees and the administrative role of the president."

Good board/president relations are like good marriages; they don't just happen. A good board and a good president work at establishing and maintaining a very special relationship. The best way to begin is to sit down together and mutually develop a clear, common vision; an understanding of where the college should be heading and the priorities to be used to get there; a vision that is owned by both the board and the president. Then as the board stands back a bit, challenging and supporting, the president expands and builds the dream, using all of her skills to share that vision and lead campus and community toward these goals. If everyone is promoting the same vision, there will be no misunderstanding over athletic directors.

Boards need to be realistic in what they ask a president to accomplish. Delaware County Community College in Pennsylvania set priorities for a new president and asked him to report back with a self-evaluation at the end of the first year. He did that, but he also included the amount of time he had spent on each project and the amount of time that would be necessary to accomplish what had been desired. The board observed that there was no way any mortal man could have accomplished what they had requested.

Speaking of evaluations...an annual evaluation tailored to each individual college is a good way to force a board to sit down with their president and assess where their relationship is. There are all kinds of evaluations so this, too, should be reasonable. One former president said one of his evaluations had notified him that on one occasion he had neglected to respond

when greeted in the hall. Eldon Shafer, President of Lane Community College in Oregon, reported that one board had "compiled a list of 726 ways a president could go wrong."

Don't judge a president based on one event, good or bad. Look at the long-term picture. Evaluate routinely, not just at crisis times, and make the evaluation process a constructive one. Evaluations should address such things as present leadership, long-range planning, budgeting and finance, condition and adequacy of facilities, curriculum development, meeting educational and training needs of the area, honest public relations, and selection and retention of qualified personnel. Also, if something bothers you, don't wait all year for evaluation time before you talk about it. Solve the little things as you go along, and you will have established a pattern for handling anything bigger. Communicate with each other. That means board members get to read a lot. Some boards get more information than they can use but need better information than they get. Don't mix internal campus decision making with the responsibilities of trustees. Don't surprise each other. If you hear something about the college, pass it on to the president, don't take it upon yourself to investigate and give a full blown report at the next board meeting. Let the president investigate and get back to you. Don't play the "gottcha" game. And the president may want to send up red flags even when he or she thinks a situation will simmer down. It's downright embarrassing for a trustee to hear college scuttlebutt for the first time on the street; it's much better to have a few false alarms and be prepared to explain or defend. The president needs to remember that the board is a talented resource which will advise him and protect him if he keeps it informed.

I urge boards to be aware of the president's need for challenge and growth, for affiliation and peer support and for intellectual stimulation. Encourage professional growth through academies and state and national affiliations which offer the opportunity of exchanging ideas and information and forming peer networks. Make sure your workaholic president is taking vacations. Quality presidents thrive on new ideas and challenges. And these new ideas and challenges create a ripple effect as they feed down through the campus, making it a more vital and exciting place to work and to study. Don't shortchange your president on salary and fringes. It just doesn't pay.

Through the good and the bad, from graduation to demonstration, both parties are urged to maintain a good sense of humor for, as someone once said, the person who laughs, lasts -- particularly if you can laugh at yourself.

If boards and presidents haven't considered all these items and moved well into comfortable territory with a clear vision and lots of mutual support, trust and respect, by the time the honeymoon is over there may well be talk of divorce. And if divorce occurs, what happens then? One-third of the presidents who leave a presidency go on to another school as president. The balance retire go into teaching or into another type of business. And the college...by the time a CEO search occurs, a new president is hired and the college has stabilized, it will have lost two to three years of quality time. If the new president doesn't work out, the process repeats, and the college could well be on a downhill slide that will be hard to stop. That's why it's so important for both boards and presidents to really work to establish a quality relationship. There are no perfect presidents and no perfect boards, but together good presidents and good boards can build almost perfect board/president relationships which will foster excellent colleges.

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